

2017-2018 INFLUENZA SURVEILLANCE IN VIRGINIA: **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR SENTINEL LABORATORIES SENDING PRE-SCREENED** **POSITIVE SPECIMENS**

The purpose of flu surveillance

How is influenza surveillance conducted in Virginia?

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) monitors the level of activity of influenza-like illness (ILI) each week from October through May. Those are the months when influenza ("flu") is most likely to occur in Virginia, and that time period is referred to as the "flu season".

The Virginia Department of Health uses a number of different data sources to determine the level of flu activity that is occurring each week during flu season. The main data sources that are used to make the weekly flu activity level determination are laboratory reports, outbreak reports, and data on visits to hospital emergency departments and urgent care centers for influenza-like illness.

The state public health laboratory, DCLS (Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services), performs confirmatory influenza testing on specimens collected from inpatients or outpatients with influenza-like illness who are seen by sentinel providers. These providers can be physicians' offices, urgent care facilities, or hospitals (including their affiliated laboratories).

This season, a few of the laboratories that perform polymerase chain reaction (PCR) influenza assays are asked to forward a subset of their PCR-positive influenza specimens ("pre-screened positives") to DCLS for confirmation. Testing more positives at DCLS using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) PCR assay will allow us to detect a novel influenza strain if it is circulating in the population and will further contribute to national influenza virologic surveillance goals.

State health officials combine this information with other data, such as absentee rates in public schools, in order to form a dynamic picture of influenza's impact among populations. During the flu season, circulating influenza strains are evaluated and influenza activity levels are determined on a weekly basis.

How are flu surveillance data used?

Flu surveillance information enables state and local health officials to help keep physicians, hospitals, and facilities, such as nursing homes and schools, better apprised of what to expect during the flu season. Further, the information helps to support federal influenza surveillance activities that monitor for the emergence of potentially serious strains of influenza, including viral strains with pandemic potential. The identification of circulating strains of influenza virus also helps to inform decision-making for influenza vaccine production.

Obtaining pre-screened positives to send to DCLS

How many pre-screened positives should I send per week?

Based on the population of Virginia, influenza epidemiologists have estimated that we need DCLS to confirm 16 positives per week at the beginning and end of the influenza season and 54 per week at the peak of the season to be able to detect a novel event at a low enough threshold for effective intervention and control measures.

We ask our providers of pre-screened positives to send all of your positives (if fewer than 5 during the beginning and end of the influenza season) and up to 10 specimens a week during the peak of the season.

When should the specimens be sent?

We suggest that your site batch your positive specimens for a given week and send them the following Monday. We ask for specimens to be shipped on days that avoid shipment arrival over weekends or holidays.

What type and quantity of specimen are you looking for?

Providers of pre-screened positives should submit clinical samples that have been tested using polymerase chain reaction and found to be positive for Influenza A or Influenza B. Nucleic acid may be submitted, but only after consultation with DCLS. DCLS requires at least 0.5 ml of sample for testing. Please call the lab at (804) 648-4480, extension 227 if there are questions regarding specimen submission.

The laboratory form and specimen

What information is needed on the specimen label?

Specimen labeling instructions are available on the VDH sentinel influenza website (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/influenza-flu-in-virginia/influenza-surveillance/sentinel-influenza-reporting-for-virginia/>) under the “Important Links for Sentinel Providers” section.

What information is needed for the lab form that goes with the specimen?

Basic information on the patient and your facility is required, including the pre-screened positive outbreak ID (**RES989FluPSP17**). Please complete the DCLS Clinical Microbiology/Virology Request Form. If you need additional forms, contact Ms. Mattie Jones at DCLS (804) 648-4480, extension 104.

Shipping pre-screened positive influenza specimens

DCLS wants to avoid rejecting specimens due to improper collection or transport procedures. Detailed specimen collection and shipment instructions are available on the VDH sentinel influenza website (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/influenza-flu-in-virginia/influenza-surveillance/sentinel-influenza-reporting-for-virginia/>) under the “Important Links for Sentinel Providers” section.

How do I store specimens until I can call for shipment?

Place specimens in the refrigerator at (4-8°C) until they can be placed in the Styrofoam shipper for transport. Shipping should occur within 7 days using a frozen cold pack. If shipping cannot occur within 7 days, the samples must be frozen at -70°C or colder and shipped using dry ice.

How do I arrange for specimen pick up?

Use the DCLS courier service whenever possible, if your site has access to it. See <https://dgs.virginia.gov/division-of-consolidated-laboratory-services/lab-services/courier-list/> for a list of courier sites. In other cases, call UPS for a pick up regarding package drop off for delivery to DCLS. Your local health department may also be able to assist with specimen pick up, but this is dependent upon staff resources. Discuss this with your district epidemiologist/influenza coordinator on a case-by-case basis. **Do not ship on Friday or before a holiday.**

What about shipping around state holidays?

Virginia Department of Health and the state laboratory (DCLS) are closed on state holidays and on weekends. Transport of specimens occurs overnight; therefore, specimens should not be shipped before a state holiday (for example, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving). Likewise, specimens should not be shipped on Fridays, as the laboratory is closed to specimen receipt on weekends.

Whom do I call if I have a specimen-related question, problem, or shipping issue?

Call DCLS at (804) 648-4480, extension 227. If the laboratory is unavailable, call your local health district flu coordinator.

Use of surveillance data at my healthcare facility

Will I be able to use the surveillance testing data to help diagnose and/or treat my patients?

Please note that laboratory testing is for surveillance purposes only. Results will not be available within a timeframe suitable for patient management. Routine influenza surveillance laboratory results will be mailed to you.

Supplies of specimen collection kits

How do I order lab kits to replace the ones I send off each week?

We will do our best to automatically send out kit replacements. You are always welcome to contact DCLS for additional kits and materials if needed: 804-648-4480, extension 104.

Reporting confirmatory results to VDH

My facility already reports our influenza results that are positive by PCR to the local health department. If we send the pre-screened positives to DCLS, do we still need to report to VDH?

Yes. Please continue to report your confirmatory influenza results (i.e., PCR, culture, or direct fluorescent antibody test) to the local health department according to state disease reporting regulations. However, if a specimen is forwarded to DCLS as a pre-screened positive, we would also appreciate you indicating the outbreak ID on the report (**RES989FluPSP17**) so we do not double-count this result in our surveillance data.